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EARLY DAYS IN WASHOE

BY ALFRED JAMES.

[Read before the Pioneers, December, 1901.]

I will say as a prelude and introduction to what I may say directly touching the discovery of the Comstock mine, that prior to 1856 there was very little inter-communication between California and the country east of the Sierras, known as Washoe, for the reason that the great Sierras presented a formidable barrier to travel—rendering such inter-communication both difficult and expensive. Moreover, the country was sparsely settled and but little known, there being up to this time no mineral discoveries in the country worthy of mention, and withal, it was regarded as very uninviting.

It therefore becomes a pertinent inquiry as to what should primarily lead one to leave so attractive and prosperous a country as California to seek a home in this land of sage brush and desert wastes; the sequel to which may not be uninteresting as a scrap of unwritten history, even at this late period in the history of this interesting country.

Along the eastern base of the Sierras, the summit of which forms the coterminous boundary between California and Nevada, as it did between Utah and California, there is a chain of beautiful and comparatively fertile valleys, which even in their primeval condition, were sufficiently inviting to attract thither a number of settlers who established homes here and there throughout these valleys. These settlers were nearly all disciples of Brigham Young. In 1857 the Saints were having a little difficulty with Uncle Sam, on which occasion the Mormon President called in all his disciples from these distant outlying settlements. Most of them obeyed the call and returned to Salt Lake City, whereupon a few adventurous spirits, citizens of Downieville, near the border, consisting of J. J. Musser, Abraham Curry, Benjamin Green, Frank Proctor and myself, crossed over the mountains in July, 1858, to possess ourselves of some of the vacated territory.

We did not contemplate the broad field for enterprise and adventure which we were then entering, nor did we even dream

of the fact that we were upon the very threshold of the most marvelous mineral discoveries known to the world's history. Our ultimate object was to push the proposition of the organization of a new territory out of Western Utah.

With this object in view, after visiting nearly all the valleys and becoming fully satisfied with the outlook, and considering the probable outcome of the scheme in contemplation, as to a betterment of chances financial, political and otherwise, I returned to California. Here, having associated with me W. L. Jernigan, a practical printer, then in an office in Downieville, we issued a prospectus of the Territorial Enterprise.

Leaving Mr. Jernigan to complete details for the purchase of press and office, I returned to Washoe, by way of Placerville, leaving there on horseback the latter part of October. About six miles out from Placerville I overtook Mr. Klauber, late of the firm of Klauber & Levi, of San Diego, who, as he informed me, was on his way to Carson Valley for the purpose of purchasing a ranch. I also disclosed to him my purpose. We traveled the entire distance in a merciless snow storm, and being fellow sufferers as well as fellow travelers, we became confidential friends.

I digress to make mention of this incident, as I may make mention of further co-relative circumstances of interest later on.

I had on my first visit determined to locate at the town of Genoa, in Carson Valley, which, though a mere village of not more than 50 inhabitants, was the largest and most important settlement east of the Sierras and west of Salt Lake City. The business houses consisted of two hotels, two stores, post office and telegraph office, the latter established in November, 1858. After the Mormon exodus, there were very few settlers left in any of the valleys. In Eagle Valley, near the center of which Carson City, the capital of the state is situated, there were not at that time more than a dozen inhabitants, and not a single house on the site of the present capital city. The subscription list of the Enterprise embraced a wide territory, forty-five of them being in Salt Lake City. Forty of these subscribers cancelled their subscriptions on the appearance of an article which I wrote and published in the sixth number, criticising the polygamous side of Mormonism, in view of the treasonable and defiant attitude of the Mormons against the government.

I felt fully justified in doing this, as the Enterprise was the only gentile paper then published in the territory. All per-

sons in Utah at that time not members of the Mormon church were called "gentiles."

The Enterprise was a success from its inception; but I must concede that its long and prosperous career was largely due to the unanticipated discovery of the great Comstock Lode, and its marvelous consequences—an event which ended its labors in its chosen field in a few months, when the territory of Nevada was organized.

The discovery of the Comstock lode, with the coincident and manifold results pertaining thereto, and resulting therefrom, comprises one of the most marvelous and noteworthy mining events in the world's history; and therefore, any retrospective and reliable narrative, embracing its prehistoric condition, its discovery, and the incidents and circumstances leading thereto, is both interesting and instructive.

In contemplating and passing over in review, the unwritten history of the discovery and development of this great mine, embracing the flush times of the early "Sixties," what tragic and dramatic scenes are rehearsed! What tales of woe and disappointed hopes are told! What an array of dissipation and moral depravity, and what a pathetic record of the broken fountains of domestic felicity, are unfolded—all of which leads one to believe that, verily, as a sage has said, "Money is the root of all evil."

I might present a pitiable array of disastrous effects in a large percentage of instances, of sudden transition from poverty to affluence which came under my personal observation during the early days of the Comstock, consisting of broken domestic ties, wreck, ruin and premature death, of many persons of my personal acquaintance of the class herein referred to, many of whom were young men of ability, with bright hopes, lead into temptation, gambling and dissipation, either through personal financial flush times, or through environment. But the picture is a sad one, which awakens unpleasant memories, over which it is more pleasing to spread the mantle of charity and forgetfulness.

The great vein of the Comstock is located on the eastern slope of Mount Davidson, and passes southeasterly through the divide between Virginia and Gold Hill, coming out on the Gold Hill side, very nearly in the head of Gold Cañon, the **length of which is about seven miles**, and its course is southeasterly. It contains gold its entire length, which was in paying quantities at the time of my first visit some time previous to the discovery at Gold Hill and in "Six-Mile Cañon."

Six-Mile Cañon virtually heads at the Comstock lode. It is six miles long, and its course is very nearly east. Both of these cañons discharge into Carson river. It appears from an item in the Enterprise of January 29th, 1859, that Comstock and French discovered and located very rich diggings at the head of Gold Cañon, which created no little excitement, and resulted in the location of the entire ground in the vicinity within a few days.

These locations were the first made at Gold Hill, and were subsequently found to be on the south or Gold Hill end of the Comstock, in which gold largely predominated, while the north or Virginia end of the vein, carries very little gold. A few days prior to this discovery, the discovery was made in Six-Mile Cañon by Yount and Gould, where they obtained gold in large quantities. This gold contained so large a percentage of silver that it sold for only \$8.00 per ounce, while that obtained at Gold Hill was worth \$13.00.

The deposits of gold in both these cañons doubtless resulted from erosion and disintegration of ore from the great lode. None of the miners in the vicinity being familiar with the quartz, it was some months later before they realized the existence or magnitude of the great vein.

In fact, the original discoverers and locators of this great lode, with very few exceptions, entertained but the most limited and crude conception of the great magnitude of the discovery, and the enormous fortunes which they had within their grasp, as manifested by the astonishing low figures at which they parted with their holdings.

As to the all important fact in a historical point of view as to who was the actual first discoverer of this great mineral wonder, considering all the circumstances and facts which I have been able to summarize in relation thereto, I find it a most difficult problem.

From the items which I gathered in the premises for the Enterprise, and from personal information, I am satisfied that at least Comstock and French made the first discovery of the rich placers at Gold Hill, and which ultimately and in a very short time, led to the ledge which made great fortunes for Sandy Bowers and many others.

I remember also that Comstock was a prominent figure on the north end or Virginia side, and was among the first locators on the lode on that side of the Gold Hill divide, and that by

mutual consent, he was accredited with the honor of making the discovery.

However, the miners working in Six-Mile Cañon encountered great quantities of float from the croppings of the vein, which would have led a modern prospector to the vein in twenty minutes. This increased in quantity, in its metaliferous appearance, and in weight, to such an extent, as they worked up the cañon, as to arouse a suspicion that possibly it might contain the silver which so depreciated the value of their gold dust. None of these miners were familiar with mineral ores or mineral veins of any kind, and were especially unfamiliar with silver ore, or the appearance of silver veins.

About this time two Mexicans made their appearance in the camp, and being familiar with silver ore, on examination of this float, pronounced it silver ore of probable high grade. Upon this information, a quantity of the ore was sent over to California for assay, and showed the astonishing result of \$1500.00 per ton. This was about the later part of June or early in July, 1859.

Conspicuous among the miners on the ground at that time were Comstock, "Old Virginia," or James Finney; Peter O'Reily, Patrick McLaughlin, Gould and Yount, and practically all of the eighteen whom I met at Johnstown on my first visit; many of whose names I do not remember now, who made a rush for the new diggings upon catching the first breeze of the exciting news from Gold Hill.

And thus it was that this little band of miners, this vanguard of wandering prospectors, in this desolate and apparently almost worthless country, discovered, located and owned that which has given business, commercial, political and social life to a vast, trackless desert waste; peopled and changed the face of a great inland empire, from the Rocky Mountains on the east to the Sierra Nevada's on the west. "That which has produced hundreds of millions of dollars, inspired and hastened the construction of the first great trans-continental railway, stretched cables under the sea, built palaces, and, perhaps, had much to do with deciding the result of the mightiest war of modern times."

It is evident from the circumstances here related, that the discovery and many of the locations were practically made simultaneously. About this time, or to be more exact, on July 9th, 1859, an item was published in the Enterprise stating that Bowers & Co., of Gold Hill, from one pan of rock, pounded up

in a mortar, obtained \$100.00. This item is the first historical or authentic mention of the recovery of gold or silver from rock in place in the State of Nevada.

A correspondent of the Enterprise, writing from Gold Hill, under date of July 16th, '59, says: that the hills are swarming with prospectors and adventurers; that claims are changing hands at from \$1,000 to \$5000, and that Rogers & Co., with a run of three days, with two arastras cleaned up \$776.00.

While these exciting discoveries were being made on the Gold Hill or the south side, the discoveries on the north or Virginia side were equally sensational. These sensational items, together with the \$1500.00 assay, caused a rush from the neighboring valleys, and from every village, town and city in California came excited thousands. New conditions and exigencies were presented and continually multiplied, and called for non-existent remedies.

Silver mines were unknown in America and to Americans; the metallurgy of silver was a sealed book. There were a few Freyburgers in the country, notably Kuistell and Mosheimer, who were familiar with the system in vogue in Germany for the reduction of silver ores, and their services were invoked with success in this emergency. This slow process, however, which had been satisfactorily used in Germany for a century or more, was unsatisfactory to American push and American genius. In a few months the Freyburg process was supplanted and rendered obsolete by the substitution of American machinery and American methods, since which time there has been but little demand for Freyburgers in American reduction works.

Previous to the introduction of Freyburg reduction works, claim owners having become fully informed by frequent and numerous assays of the great value of the ore discovered, not only in the croppings, but of the float as well—which they had been casting aside, commenced shipping to California; and as the road over the summit of the mountains was not in condition to admit of teaming, the ore was packed on mules to Placerville at an expense of ten cents per pound. In this manner large quantities of ore from the float and croppings was shipped.

Much carelessness was manifest in making locations of claims. Interminable disputes arose and endless litigation ensued. Personal conflict with tragical consequences was of frequent occurrence, and valuable ground, in some instances, was fortified and held by force of arms. New laws had to be evolved to meet the extraordinary circumstances, which had been so suddenly and unexpectedly thrust upon the country.

To meet this serious emergency, the people of Carson County elected my brother, John C. James, a representative to the Utah legislature, shortly to convene, to secure such legislation as was imperatively demanded. Whether he was a good Mormon during his stay with the "Saints" I cannot say, but being the only Gentile member, he secured the passage of every measure which he introduced.

Of all the great mining excitements, which have so often convulsed the mining communities on the Pacific Coast, the Washoe was, perhaps, in point of numbers and impetuosity, the most extraordinary; and by the time these laws were in force, the country was literally swarming with an excited, unrestrained and restless people, and matters were becoming somewhat chaotic, which, however, assumed a normal condition when restraining and equitable laws were put in force.

I find that I am approaching a period presenting too broad a field for eventful narrative for the present occasion, and I will therefore, revert back to those whom I should be pleased to designate, as the fortunate discoverers and owners of the most wonderful and valuable mine in America, if not in the world.

But were they fortunate? Let the following events answer:

Henry Page Comstock, who was an honest, confiding, rather simple-minded man, with but little knowledge of the wicked ways of the world, through a number of unfortunate and unbusiness-like transactions, (which I might mention: including the sale, for a trifling consideration, of property which should have made him a multi-millionaire), was soon divested of his little fortune, became a roving prospector through Idaho and Montana, and finally committed suicide in a small mining camp in Montana.

McLaughlin, with his full claim on the Comstock—a princely fortune, sold for \$500 and died in penury in California. Peter O'Reily held on to his claim until he received \$50,000 for it, which he lost in stocks and finally died in a mad-house. James Finney was thrown from a mustang, or California horse, and sustained injuries from which he died.

Sandy Bowers, one of the early locators, a conspicuous operator at Gold Hill, recovered from his mines a considerable fortune; built what is known as the "Bower's Mansion," in Washoe Valley, in which the door knobs are all solid silver, and died of consumption many years ago. His widow was left in poverty and has made a precarious living practicing clairvoyancy.

A. Klauber, whom I have heretofore mentioned in this narrative as having been my companion in crossing the mountains from Placerville, with the apparent business intuition of his people, proceeded at once on his arrival in Carson Valley, to buy the ranch which he had mentioned on the way, and from it he cut a great quantity of hay. He also built a large store house in Genoa and filled it with goods, the like of which, as to quantity, had never been seen on the eastern slope, which was, under all business and speculative conditions at that time, an apparently doubtful business adventure. Yet, I paid him in the following spring \$25 for a fifty-pound sack of flour, and at the rate of \$500 per ton for a considerable quantity of hay, under circumstances which I may hereafter relate.